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ABSTRACT

Noting that too many people, including college teachers and administrators, view literature as entertainment and, thus, impractical in the "real world" of employment, a teacher at North Hennepin Community College in suburban Minneapolis supports requiring literature as the primary reading in Freshman English classes. After remarking that a visiting "expert" once told an assembled college faculty that teaching students to read computer manuals was more practical than teaching them to read short stories, the paper makes the following four points. First, reading literature is practical since all meaningful communication, including reading, is metaphorical. Because literature is the discipline that deals most directly with learning through metaphors, learning to read literature properly is the most direct way of learning to image properly what is read, a skill that is the key in reading technical manuals, if--a big "if"--they are well written. Next, reading literature can be enjoyable if it is fun, if it deals with important human topics, or if it helps empower students personally--or, better yet, if it does all three. Third, reading literature is an efficient way for students to become critical thinkers. If critical thinking is taught through responding to literature, students bring to the critical thinking task a life-time of relevant experience. They become aware that critical thinking is part of everyday life, rather than an exercise for some college course. Finally, reading literature in Freshman English classes is the easiest way for a college to encourage awareness of and respect for cultural diversity. (NH)

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Requiring Literature in Freshman Composition

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I would remind community college English instructors who oppose the use of literature in Freshman Composition of two things: first, a characteristic of an educated person is that the educated person will be able to transfer learning. Thus, those of us who teach the basics of composition do not have to teach different writing courses for every discipline within "the academy."

But even more important than that is an awareness of what the purpose of higher education is. The purpose of public (required) education is to raise a child so that child can be a reasonable adult within the village; the purpose of higher (voluntary) education is provide the student with the information, skills, and, most importantly, attitudes, so that the student will be able to function outside of the home village, perhaps even becoming a citizen of the world and being able to say "yes" to Rodney King's poignant question, "Can we all get along?"

For about 25 years, my college, North Hennepin Community College in suburban Minneapolis, has had Freshman English courses that combine composition and literature. In fact, the courses in the required Freshman English program are described as "literature based

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composition courses." Periodically, I have found it necessary to explain ("defend" would, perhaps, be more accurate) the decision to combine composition and literature in required Freshman English courses. Such explanations focus on why literature should be required in these courses because too many people, including many college teachers and administrators, view literature as entertainment and, thus, impractical in the "real world" of employment.

Ironically, no one questions whether Freshman English courses should require composition. That is ironic because, in spite of Freshman English instructors who enthuse about students "producing texts," how much actual writing most people will be required to do in the future is open to question. An ever decreasing percentage of people, even those with employment requiring college degrees, will be call on to generate information and to organize that information in coherent, written form. The technology of today--and certainly of the future--has eliminated or will eliminate many of the traditional reasons for learning how to write. But no one has seriously suggested that people in the future will be able to succeed in any real way without knowing how to read.

Be that as it may, college degrees for the foreseeable future will continue to require the successful student to both read and write. In fact, basing writing on reading is what separates academic writing form other types of writing. College, more than most other human environments, is a literate environment that rewards those who read clearly and who write coherently based on that reading. Thus, having Freshman English classes require writing based on reading makes sense. Further, requiring that literature be the primary reading in Freshman

English classes can be supported by at least four points.

First, in spite of the claims of many well-meaning people, reading literature is practical. A friend who teaches at another community college ruefully told me of a visiting "expert" who told her assembled colleagues, as the college's administrators nodded wisely in agreement, that teaching students to read computer manuals was more practical than teaching them to read short stories. What nonsense! All meaningful communication, including reading, is metaphorical. Because literature is the subject matter that deals most directly with learning through metaphors, learning to read literature properly is the most direct way (and, therefore, the most practical way) of learning to image properly what is read. Being able to image accurately is the key skill in reading technical manuals. The person who is able to read literature well will have the skills to read computer manuals--if (and this is a big "if") the manual is well written.

This leads to the second reason for requiring the reading of literature in Freshman English classes--reading literature is enjoyable. That is, it can be enjoyable if the skill is developed under the guidance of a good teacher. (On the Freshman level, the good teacher of literature will reject three common approaches that consistently fail--emphasizing the art forms of literature; emphasizing the history of literature; and emphasizing what was taught in the teacher's most recent graduate school course in literature.) Reading literature can be enjoyable if it is fun, or if it deals with important human topics, or if it helps empower students personally--or, better yet, if it does all three. (Maybe Johnny can't read because

Johnny was never given anything enjoyable to read.)

Third, reading literature is an efficient way for students to become critical thinkers. The basis of critical thinking is drawing reasonable conclusions after carefully considering available evidence. In literature, this evidence centers on characters and conflicts--the same things that a student's life centers on, people and relationships. Thus, if critical thinking is taught through responding to literature, the student brings to the critical thinking task a life-time of relevant experience. The student then becomes aware that critical thinking is part of everyday life, rather than an exercise for some college course.

Finally, reading literature in Freshman English classes is the easiest way for a college to encourage awareness of and respect for cultural diversity. Colleges will not educate people to become citizens of our global village by concentrating exclusively on skills (such as, writing on the job) or information (such as that found in computer manuals). Certainly as important as (and probably more important than) skills and information are the attitudes of the person who would claim to be educated. When I went to China the first time, our delegation of editors and publishers included only two people who knew Mandarin at all. Yet the one who knew the language best is the one who got along worst in China. He had a Ph.D. and an important position in the United States, and he knew the language better than anyone else in our group. So why didn't he get along in China? Because he was a jerk--in whatever language he was using. Perhaps, if he had been encouraged as a student to respect "the other among us" (and within us), he could have been successful in China. Culturally diverse

literature can help the student to develop respect for "the other among us." For that literature to be part of a required Freshman English program is the easiest way for a college to introduce cultural diversity to the majority of its students.

Thus, combining composition and literature in required Freshman English classes makes sense not only because it introduces first-year students to the type of writing necessary to succeed in college but also because, if it is done right, it is practical, enjoyable, an efficient way to develop critical thinking and the easiest way to introduce large numbers of students to cultural diversity. But to "do it right" will usually require Freshman English instructors to grapple with two issues that are not covered in graduate school courses--(1) how to deal with the literature in a required first-year course, and (2) how to incorporate culturally diverse literature into the reading list for the course. But after those issues have been addressed, a college should be ready to combine literature and composition in its Freshman English program.